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RHMFIUU/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: A/S BLAKE RAISES TIBETAN, BHUTANESE REFUGEES IN
KATHMANDU

Summary

¶1. (SBU) The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) representative in Kathmandu told visiting Assistant Secretary Robert Blake that registration and i.d. card issuance for the Tibetan refugee population remains politically sensitive, but that UNHCR remains optimistic progress can be made. The Nepali Prime Minister and Foreign Minister expressed support for refugee protection and third-country resettlement, but urged the U.S. and others to press Bhutan to accept repatriation. The Assistant Secretary emphasized the importance of protecting both Tibetan and Bhutanese refugees and promised to continue raising the repatriation of refugees with the Government of Bhutan.

UNHCR

¶2. (SBU) Daisy Dell, Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Nepal, told Assistant Secretary of State for South and Central Asia Robert Blake on June 12 that Tibetan refugee issues, including resettlement, continue to be politically sensitive and difficult to resolve. Dell also reported that the Government of Nepal (GON) is still resisting Chinese pressure to close the Transit Center for new Tibetan arrivals. UNHCR recently confirmed the GON's willingness to assist new arrivals from the border region in reaching the Transit Center, and its firm commitment to protect Tibetans from deportation.

¶3. (SBU) Dell said UNHCR is currently focusing its efforts on reissuance of refugee identification cards (last issued in 1986) to qualifying Tibetans and issuance of new cards to their children over the age of 16 and other immediate family members. She acknowledged that the change of government is delaying the start of this program. Dell said she is continuing discussions at the working level and believes a registration/ID program may be possible within six months. The UNHCR Representative hopes that the registration program will eventually address the estimated 6,000-7,000 post-1990 arrivals who currently have no status. She admitted that initially the government has only agreed to reissue cards to Tibetans who already have them -- and to those who are

clearly entitled to derivative status.

¶4. (SBU) Dell thanked A/S Blake for U.S. leadership in seeking a durable solution for the protracted Bhutanese refugee problem. She reported that more than 15,000 have already been resettled to third countries, and more than 70,000 have expressed interest in resettlement. UNHCR is beginning to look ahead to the post-resettlement period; she acknowledged that Bhutan's continuing intransigence does not make repatriation a likely option, at least in the near term.

The UNHCR Representative noted that senior GON officials continue to be equally opposed to local integration, but that at the working level there is an acknowledgment that a residual Bhutanese population will be left in Nepal at the conclusion of the resettlement program. Dell is leading an effort to engage other UN agencies in development efforts that will integrate services provided to the local community with those provided to the refugees, thereby making a more conducive environment for long-term local integration.

Prime Minister

¶5. (SBU) In a meeting on June 12 with A/S Blake (septel), Prime Minister M.K. Nepal thanked the United States for its generosity in resettling so many Bhutanese refugees -- with one caveat. Resettlement, in his view, constituted a shifting of the problem, not a solution. The refugees should be able to return to their own country. He expressed the hope that the U.S. and other countries would put pressure on Bhutan to allow that to happen.

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Foreign Minister

¶6. (SBU) Responding to a strong plea by A/S Blake for Nepal to protect both Tibetan and Bhutanese refugees, Foreign Minister Sujata Koirala confirmed on June 12 that the GON would continue to offer protection, as in the past, and she requested UNHCR to follow up immediately with her if any issues arose. Koirala reported that, during a trip to Texas in 2008, resettled Bhutanese refugees she met appeared to be happy and adapting well. She stressed, however, that those preferring repatriation, especially the elderly, should have that right. The Assistant Secretary agreed, and promised that, even though the Government of Bhutan did not want to accept any refugees back, we would continue to raise the issue, particularly the right of the elderly to return.

Comment

¶7. (SBU) The current coalition's professions of support for refugees strike us as genuine. The biggest challenge for the Nepali Government at present, even more than Chinese pressure on Tibetan issues, is assembling a functioning cabinet. Until then, progress seems unlikely.

POWELL